

Johnson pledges to “restart the economy” as pandemic rages in UK

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Boris Johnson’s Conservative government continued discussions with big business and trade union leaders yesterday to map out a “mass return to work.”

Talks continued despite Wednesday’s announcement of thousands more people who perished in care homes of COVID-19 being added to a grim death toll that has now reached nearly 27,000.

Yesterday, deaths continued to mount, with 674 new fatalities announced, taking the official total to 26,711. Deaths in hospitals in England alone surpassed 20,000. Of the new deaths, 169 people died outside hospital either in care homes or “in the community.”

The continuing loss of life barely registered with a national media obsessed with reporting which chain store is opening its doors, when the lockdown “exit strategy” will be announced, and with Johnson’s new baby. Only the *Daily Mirror* and *Independent* front paged with the horrific death toll, but even then the story was placed below a photo of the “baby joy” smiling faces of Johnson and partner Carrie Symonds.

Speaking at his first daily Downing Street press conference in five weeks, Johnson piled lie upon lie, declaring that “for the first time we are past the peak of this disease ... and on the downward slope.”

This was as the *Daily Mail* noted: “Revised UK figures including deaths outside hospitals showed that there have been nine days when the death toll topped 1,000—ranging from April 7 to as recently as April 24.”

Over 10,000 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in the 48 hours prior to yesterday’s briefing. Johnson lied about the first phase of the pandemic being over even as 6,032 new cases of coronavirus were reported in the previous 24 hours—the second highest daily total in the UK so far. These were on top of the 4,076 new cases of COVID-19 reported Wednesday and brought confirmed cases to 33,175 in the last week alone.

Johnson claimed that the government “did the right

thing at the right time.” This is another lie. Any decrease in the rate of infection, as indicated in the fall of the reproduction (“R”) value of the virus to between 0.6 and 0.9, as claimed by government science adviser Sir Patrick Vallance, and fall in the rate of deaths, is the result of measures that the government was forced to implement—social distancing and the lockdown—that it now proposes to abandon.

In particularly offensive comments, Johnson declared his government had worked wonders and “avoided an uncontrollable and catastrophic epidemic where the reasonable worst-case scenario was 500,000 deaths.” Instead, the UK had come through “some huge Alpine tunnel” and “we can see the sunlight and pasture ahead of us.”

Nursing Notes reported yesterday that at least 156 health and social care workers are believed to have died of COVID-19. Yet Johnson—whose government has brought the National Health Service to its knees through billions in cuts, destaffing and privatisation—declared, “At no stage has our NHS been overwhelmed, no patient went without a ventilator, no patient was deprived of intensive care, we have five of the seven projected Nightingale wards.”

This conceals the fact that as part of its “herd immunity” policy, the population was told to stay away from hospitals and “self-isolate” if they had COVID-19 symptoms. Some were refused admittance to hospital, were not tested and died, as they were not deemed a “priority.” Others died because they were so ill when they attended hospital that they could not be saved.

A new study published by scientists at the University of Liverpool found that a third of patients admitted to hospital in the UK after being infected with COVID-19 died there. A huge number of the deaths have taken place outside hospital, with care homes for the elderly and vulnerable transformed into killing fields.

Johnson responded to questions from journalists as to why the UK death rate was so high and what lessons could be learned by deferring to Chief Medical Officer Sir Chris Whitty, who said that no lessons could be learned while a pandemic was under way but only when it ended.

Giving his government a clean bill of health was vital as Johnson announced that next week he would outline a plan to “restart the economy.” Answering a question from the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg, Johnson said, “We mourn for every life lost,” before adding that “we mourn for the economic damage as well that the country is sustaining ...”

His main concern was the risk of “a second bout” or a “second bad spike” of COVID-19 “because that would really do lasting economic damage and that’s why we’ve got to calibrate our measures and make sure we unlock the economy gradually.”

These plans have been in the making for weeks, formulated in ongoing discussions between ministers, business leaders and the trade unions. The *Financial Times* reported Thursday, “The government is set to issue detailed ‘workplace by workplace’ guidance on how Britain can safely go back to work, as the prime minister prepares to announce that coronavirus is being contained.

“Alok Sharma, business secretary, is aiming to produce by the weekend around 10 papers setting out in ‘granular detail’ how the economy can start to reopen once Mr Johnson orders the easing of the lockdown.”

According to the FT, only token measures will be put in place to ensure workers’ safety, with the main advice centred on employees washing their hands. “Government officials say the papers will include advice to restrict access to communal spaces, such as canteens; greatly enhanced use of hand washing and sanitising; and the avoidance of face-to-face work.”

Under the new guidance “office workers will continue to be advised to work from home where possible—avoiding congestion on public transport—with revised shift patterns in all sectors to help maintain distance in the workplace.”

This is pie in the sky. During the lockdown between 7 million and 10 million workers have been daily forced to use overcrowded public transport networks, particularly in London.

The *Daily Mail* reported that Rolls Royce, Aston Martin, Bentley, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover and Vauxhall are finalising plans to resume operations. Some major retailers are already fully back in operation ahead of any measures to be announced next week. Yesterday, hardware chain B&Q opened all its 288 stores, after

opening them gradually from April 14. McDonald’s, British Steel and construction firm Persimmon are to reopen this month.

Confederation of British Industry director-general Carolyn Fairbairn outlined its five-point plan “for a gradual, successful reopening of the UK economy” based on “conversations with unions, health workers, transport leaders and international peers.”

Writing in the *Financial Times*, she declared, “Businesses are rightly impatient to get back to work. ... Impatience must not be confused with recklessness. Restarting must be done with the utmost care. Move too soon and the UK will be back to square one with renewed controls. But while it may not yet be time to end lockdown, it is time for a restart plan, time for government to work with business like never before. The country must be prepared for the complexity of revived economic activity. The government is starting to make strides on this. It should accelerate.”

There is no scientific rationale for any return to work by anyone but essential workers. It is being carried out under conditions in which only a fraction of the population have been tested for the virus. On Wednesday—weeks after the government claimed that 100,000 tests a day would be carried out by the end of April—just 81,611 tests were conducted. The previous day only 52,429 people were tested.

Most advocates of a return to work, including Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, insist that schools should be reopened as a first step—claiming that the young are barely affected by the virus. But a study led by German virologist Christian Drosten, reported yesterday, found that even though children tend to have far milder symptoms of the disease, those infected seem to have the same levels of coronavirus circulating in their body as adults. The danger exists that were schools to reopen, they would serve as transmission areas for the spread of the virus. The study warned, “We have to caution against an unlimited reopening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation, with a widely susceptible population and the necessity to keep transmission rates low. ... Children may be as infectious as adults.”



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